Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap: A Review of

Literature and Suggestions for School Counselors

Joseph Kvanme

Adler Graduate School
Abstract

Public policy efforts to close the achievement gap between Black and White students since World War II have had mixed results and the problem still exists today. Recent legislation of No Child Left Behind indicates that the achievement gap is a persistent problem that may have lasting effects for many years to come if the gap is not closed in the near future. The paper begins with a brief history of the achievement gap between Black and White students following World War II leading up to the 21st century. Also, the author makes suggestions for how school counselors can play a role to narrow the gap using individual, small group, and classroom comprehensive school counseling techniques in the three school counseling domains including academic, peer/social, and career.
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CLOSING THE BLACK-WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap

In the United States of America, a growing trend has emerged where schools are no longer judged by the performance of their highest achieving students but by the achievement of all students (American School Counselor Association, 2005). The achievement of all students has become the mission of schools across the county and school counselor’s mission has aligned itself with that of the schools. However, school counselors know that many students do not come to school with equal academic, personal/social, and career resources considered essential for educational achievement.

The achievement gap in the U.S. was not addressed until after World War II when the G.I. Bill was introduced affording all military veterans the opportunity to increase his or her education (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009). The achievement gap continued to narrow until the late 1980s (Harris & Herington, 2006). The late 1980s and through the 1990s was a period in education where the achievement gap between Black and White students actually widened indicating the need for education reform. The first decade of the twenty-first century brought with it education reform by way of The No Child Left Behind Act changing the focus of education and implementing rewards and punishments for schools based on closing achievement gap measures (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

School counselors play a vital role in student education by implementing interventions that close achievement gaps in areas of academics, peer/social domains, and career development. School counselors advocate for students who have been marginalized by schools, districts, or states by exposing discriminatory practices, assisting families, and implementing interventions that support students who have fallen behind. Academic interventions might focus on encouraging equity across curriculum tracks, reducing class sizes, or collaborating with other
educators to improve achievement for all students, especially for struggling students. School counselors close achievement gaps by working with students on career development, improving interpersonal skills and developing their ethnic identity.

Public policy efforts to close the achievement gap between Black and White students since World War II have had mixed results and the problem still exists today. Recent legislation of No Child Left Behind indicates that the achievement gap is a persistent problem that may have lasting effects for many years to come if the gap is not closed in the near future. The paper begins by with a brief history of the achievement gap between Black and White students and suggests how school counselors can play a role in narrowing the gap.

History of the Black-White Achievement Gap

Analysis of the Problem

Throughout the history of The United States of America, there has always been an educational gap that has existed between Black and White students. The causes of the gap may have evolved over time from educational inequalities to socioeconomic inequalities, never the less; the achievement gap has always existed and still does today. Educators began noticing the disparity in achievement between Black and White students as far back as the 1950s. The U.S. made great strides in narrowing the gap through the 1960s, 1970s, and mid-1980s. A change in policy resulted in the narrowing of the achievement gap to drastically slow and even start to widen in the late-1980s, through the 1990s and is the basis for The No Child Left Behind initiative in 2001. Inequality in education between Black and White students in the U.S. has been a human rights issue for many decades and is still at the forefront of educational reform into the future.
Early Awareness of the Achievement Gap and Efforts to Narrow

Following World War II, the United States Congress passed the GI Bill that provided education and training, guaranty for business and home loans, and unemployment pay (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009). As a result of the policy reform, Head Start and Title 1 programs were developed to increase funding for schools in low-income communities that at that time were disproportionately represented by African-Americans. Initially, the intention of providing funding for these education programs was to keep schools segregated. Ultimately, Head Start and Title 1 showed the first signs of closing the achievement gap between Black Students and their White peers (Harris and Herington, 2006). In fact, desegregation may be the one factor that explains narrowing of gaps and eventually leveling the playing field where there opportunities were equal (Hanushek, 2001).

During the 1950s and through the 1970s, the achievement gap between Black students and White students was very large (Harris and Herington, 2006). According to the authors, improving content quality taught to students and increasing educational standards, progressed towards closing the achievement gap. Along with the change in content and standards, the amount of school days per year and hours in a day was increased.

Improving content standards in education for all provided Black students with the same rigorous course work as their White peers. As suggested by Harris and Herington’s (2006) article looking back on the achievement gap through the last fifty years, teaching more rigorous coursework and implementing higher standards in education did in fact improve achievement for students who would have otherwise taken courses that were just below the new standards. Teitelbaum’s (2003) study on high school course-taking patterns helped explain the general idea of education reform prior to the 1980’s. Increasing education standards will force teachers to use
more rigorous curriculum, resulting in improved student achievement (as cited in Harris and Herington, 2006).

During the reformation process, supporters of equity in schools believed that increasing standards plus increasing rigor would equal increasing achievement. However, they also feared students who were achieving at the lowest education levels would choose to give up rather than put forth the effort to meet the new requirements. Those most likely to experience the feeling of inadequacy would be many Black students who started school behind grade level in schools with inadequate resources to provide support in transitioning to higher standards (Harris and Herington, 2006).

1980s and the Achievement Gap

During the 1980s, education reform changed from focusing on content and standards to government-based accountability. During the decade, the difference in achievement between Black and White students was still large but specific reforms in education provided enormous strides in closing the gap (Harris and Herington, 2006). Promotion or graduation exams and the capacity to provide adequate resources to students were two major changes that had a great affect on the reform’s success.

Promotion exams provided incentives for students to work hard and improve their performance in education. Harris and Herington (2006) highlighted the Regent’s Exam used by the state of New York to determine if students advance to the next grade or if they will graduate from high school. The Regent’s Exam is a high profile example of a promotion or graduation exam (PGE) that had positive effects on performance and improved decision-making regarding the courses in which students choose to enroll.
According to Wong and Shen’s (2001) research on the government-based take over of the Chicago Public Schools, promotion exams improved student performance at the elementary level while increased rigorous curriculum showed the most improvement at the high school level (as cited in Harris and Herington, 2006). Even though this particular government take-over happened during the 1990s, it is important to show the value of promotion exams on increasing performance.

Capacity to provide valuable resources to students increased greatly in schools in which minority students attended. Increasing capacity and resources has contributed to closing the achievement gap post World War II through the 1980s. Decreasing pupil to teacher ratio is important in closing the achievement gap. Card and Krueger (1992) showed that because of the increased resources provided to schools in southern states with higher populations of minorities, the student to teacher ratio had dropped from 22% greater in 1946 to only 8% greater in 1965. By 1989, the gap in the pupil-teacher ratio had been nearly eliminated (Boozer et al., 1992). As the achievement gap continuously declined leading up to the 1990s, the decrease in student to teacher ratio is one constant factor that has been present.

Decreasing the number of students in each classroom has been important in closing the achievement gap. However, the quality of the teachers providing the education might be nearly as important. Card and Krueger (1992) found that school quality; i.e. ratio of students to teachers, average term length, and average annual teacher salaries; might have been responsible for much of the narrowed gap in financial earnings between Black and White people leading up to the 1980s. The evidence suggests that quality teaching influences whether or not individuals are prepared for the demands of more advanced employment. The study conducted by Borman and Kimball (2005) on teacher quality and education equity, the researchers found that minorities
and poor students were taught by far less quality teachers. Harris and Herington (2006) suggested that attracting and retaining quality teachers in schools with high numbers of minority students became an increasing problem and that it is possible that the gap only evolved from classroom size and spending to teacher quality and turnover.

Leading into the 1990s, government-based accountability in education focused on promotion/graduation exams and increased resources and the capacity in which to provide those resources. These two factors may have been the most influential changes in reform to nearly eliminate the achievement gap. Education reform in the 1990s took a drastic turn for the worse as the gap started to widen.

1990s Widening of the Achievement Gap

The outlook on closing the achievement between Black and White students appeared promising at the beginning of the 1990s. The gap was narrow and increasing capacity and resources and government-based accountability initiatives seemed to show great improvements. However, Harris and Herington (2006) indicated new government-based initiatives, market-based initiatives, and school report cards reversed the narrowing trend of the achievement gap.

In the 1990s, government-based accountability measures such as school take-overs, government oversight, and reconstruction of schools tended to be negative in closing the achievement gap. The one shining exception was the Chicago Public Schools discussed earlier. According to Wong and Shen (2001), one of the unique aspects of the Chicago Public Schools take-over was that the Mayor of the city did it rather than state or federal government.

Harris and Herington (2006) described school report cards as a tool used to provide incentives for schools that improve student performance and punishments for schools that do not. Bishop et al. (2001) found in their research on school reform that punishment for lower
performing schools had a larger effect on student performance than rewards for higher performing schools to continue performing at that level. However, as indicated by Harris and Herington (2006), the rewards and punishments might not be the element that affects school performance in closing the achievement gap. It is possible that simply reporting school performance is enough. In their findings, they come to realize that educators may be motivated by stigmatization rather than incentives.

In Alfred Adler’s theory of *Individual Psychology*, he indicates that people do not respond very well to rewards and punishments. Adler’s theory suggested that encouragement is the technique best used to help others achieve their highest potential, and that rewards and punishments were actually discouraging. Ultimately teachers will instruct students designed to achieve incentives or avoid punishments rather than teach students designed to meet student needs.

Market-based accountability initiatives were introduced in the 1990s as a way to improve student performance and close the achievement gap between Black and White students. Initiatives such as school vouchers, charter schools, and inter-district school choice were designed to provide more choices for parents in deciding which school to send their children. Different schools in various settings with a diverse focus would provide a better match to meet the needs of individual students. The pressure would now be on the individual school to perform rather than the education system as a whole. Failing schools had to improve otherwise they were at risk for losing students and ultimately their funding to continue keeping the school open.

According to Harris and Herington’s (2006) review on market-based accountability initiatives, the researchers found that there was very little evidence that suggests competition or increased choice tended to increase equity or achievement for Black students. In fact, they suggested that it
is possible that the situation may even get worse for those students who are left behind in low achieving schools because quality teachers will not be attracted to or remain at a school at risk for closing their doors due to lack of funding.

Researchers are not able to pinpoint a specific factor that fully accounts for the achievement gap trend. Lee (2002) suggested that the possible reason the achievement gap narrowed since World War II through the 70s and into the mid-80s may have been the result of several factors changing over time. The author highlighted socioeconomic and family conditions; youth culture and student behaviors; and changes in schooling conditions and practices as three general factors that have shown to have an affect on narrowing or widening the achievement gap. However, none of these factors exclusively account for the changing trend.

School Counselor Suggestions to Close the Achievement Gap

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 highlights closing the achievement gap and making schools safer for the 21st century as key components in education reform in the United States of America (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). School Counselors are in a unique position in a school to have a great influence on closing gaps and providing character education to improve overall safety in the school. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model as a guideline for comprehensive school counseling programs to narrow achievement gaps while supporting students as they develop personal/social skills, academic skills, and career development skills (American School Counselor Association, 2005). The ASCA National Model challenges every school counselor to ask themselves the question, “How are students different as a result of what school counselors do” (pp. 9). The following are data driven suggestions for schools counselors to use in developing comprehensive
school counseling programs that narrow the achievement gap between Black students and their White peers.

**Advocacy**

Advocacy as defined by House and Martin (1998) is the belief that, to fight injustices, individual and collective actions that lead toward improving conditions for the benefit of both individuals and groups are necessary. Advocating for students can be viewed as an act of speaking up or taking action that leads toward environmental changes on behalf of students (Kiselica and Robinson, 2001). Mitcham-Smith (2007) encouraged all school counselors to call to attention the needs of marginalized and oppressed students. Many school officials forget under-served students by not providing additional assistance to those of them who struggle. Also, school officials inappropriately serve marginalized and oppressed students by assigning inappropriate job duties to school staff or faculty when they are qualified to help student development in social, academic or career areas such as a school counselor monitoring lunch or incoming bus duty. School counselors have unique opportunities to create social justice in the school environment and advocate for disadvantaged students, thus, increasing the chances of reducing the achievement gap.

Bemak and Chung (2005) suggested, in the past school counselors considered their role in a school limited to counseling, consultation and coordination. School counseling job outcomes once thought to be important may not have the impact on student success as it once did. Mitcham- Smith (2007) also pointed out that most school counselors are of the majority race and were socialized in similar school systems that disserve today’s marginalized students just as it did in the past. This begs the question, “What would motivate a school counselor today to change their attitude or behavior?” Now and into the future, school counselors need to make a conscious
effort to advocate for students based on academic, career and personal/social realities that affect not just students but also the student’s family. Many families have very little or no experience at all with the requirements to get accepted in to a college institution. Counselors can teach students how to help themselves and also teach their families how to request additional support opportunities from school administration like tutoring or academic enrichment programs that lead to improvement in learning (House and Hayes, 2002).

A school counselor has a unique role within a school that requires them to advocate for all students by fighting for fairness and equity. School counselors must learn the art of being a team player while challenging the team to increase access and opportunities for all students to succeed. The school counselor has to be the voice for students on the team challenging others who consider historical practices as “given practices” (Bemak and Chung, 2005). The counselor has little authority within a school, completely depending on the support of the administration for their professional livelihood. Engaging principals and administration is the first key step in establishing authority to better advocate for equity and access for all students (Mitcham-Smith, 2007).

Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) suggested that successful school counselors have to assume five beliefs as a foundation in narrowing the achievement gap. School counselors see empowering marginalized students as a vital role within their profession by encouraging students to let their voices be heard and if need be, act as the voice. School counselors are conscious of the social implications oppression has not only on the minds of students, but also in the school and the greater community. School Counselors have high self-efficacy in their role within the school system believing that even though a school counselor is only one person, the time invested in student lives will close achievement gap between Black and White students. School
administration, specifically principals, believe in the value of empowering marginalized students as much as the school counselor. Finally, school counselors believe professional development opportunities focused on advocacy for marginalized and oppressed students will give them the necessary tools to close the achievement gap.

Bemak and Chung (2005) recommended thirteen guidelines for school counselors to advocate on the behalf of disadvantaged and minority students attending schools in urban communities. The authors suggested that the school counselor support teachers by implementing academic interventions that contribute to the success of all students. School counselors could use data-driven interventions or encourage teachers to adjust their teaching curriculum to accommodate all students.

School counselors should advocate for meeting the needs and providing equitable opportunities for all students. Bemak and Chung encouraged school counselors to advocate in both educational and social aspects of a student’s life. All students must receive access to adequate resources, reasonable time allotment to finish assignments, and fair treatment by school personnel. The way to advocate for equitable resources and fair treatment in schools is by aligning and forging partnerships with principals and other administrators to develop a school system that will not tolerate equity gaps of any kind.

Bemak and Chung implored school counselors to collaborate with their school counseling colleagues in the school, district, and state to conduct similar interventions. The combined data should support the belief school counseling work closes achievement gaps by improving grades earned by students who are marginalized or oppressed. Presenting results to the administration, teachers, and the greater community will build support to further the school counselor charge of closing achievement gaps. Involving community programs will extend the reach of school
counselor’s work out the school doors and into the public. The responsibility of closing gaps should not be limited to education settings but it must be embraced by society as a whole.

Academic Development

Smelser, Wilson, and Mitchell (2001) made a profound statement that could be used as guide not only for school counselors but also the entire school as it relates to closing the achievement gap through academic development, “Once a child enters school already less proficient than his peers, catching up requires more than keeping up; equal progress merely maintains initial disparities” (p. 384). Bruce, Getch, and Ziomek-Daigle (2009) reminded school counselors that they are in a unique position within the school to access student data that is not made available to many other school personnel. School counselors have been trained to disaggregate data and target at-risk student groups who are underachieving. Black students are among the most at-risk populations in education, and their future is in need of increased academic development opportunities to narrow the gap between their White counterparts.

School counselors should not be held solely accountable for the rise and fall of academic achievement or standardized test scores. However, a comprehensive school counseling program has produced long-term positive effects on student success (Sink & Stroh, 2003). In their study of elementary schools, Sink and Stroh attempted to find out if school counselors’ work in schools with well-established comprehensive school counseling programs promote higher academic achievement for all students. The results of the study showed that schools linking core academic areas such as English Language Arts and Math with a comprehensive school counseling program produced significantly higher achievement on test scores over those schools without a comprehensive school counseling program. Furthermore, they found that students attending schools with a comprehensive school counseling program in place for three or more years
benefited academically regardless of socioeconomic status. Although the study did not focus directly on the differences in achievement between Black and White students, it has implications for closing the achievement gap since a large portion of Black students attend schools in poor socioeconomic communities.

Many students at all levels of education have not obtained the skills necessary to succeed academically. It is important for school counselors to focus primarily on student academic competencies in classroom and small group curriculum. Integrating comprehensive school counseling standards with the school’s academic mission is not only culturally responsive, but it also contributes to narrowing the achievement gap (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009). In Schellenberg and Grothaus’ study of blending language arts and math curricula with counseling programming for a small group of African American third graders, had a direct positive impact on academic competencies, school counseling competencies, gained knowledge and higher levels of self-esteem.

Group counseling focused on academic development, regardless of ethnic origin, promotes opportunities for students to feel safe, connect with other students, share personal issues, and work toward a shared goal (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). The authors found, African American students who participated in the specifically designed group counseling intervention to improve scores on the Georgia High School Graduation Test showed favorable results on both adequate yearly progress data and individual test data. All fifteen students who participated in the academic group passed both the English Language Arts and Math portions of the graduation tests. On the enhanced English Language Arts portion of the test, the achievement gap between Black and White students was eliminated with 84% of both subgroups exceeding minimum performance. Ten of fifteen (67%) students participating in the group counseling
intervention met the required score on the enhanced Math portion of the graduation test. African American students in the study dramatically increased their overall pass rate by 63%, shrinking the achievement gap to just 7 percentage points when compared to the passing rate of White students.

Comprehensive school counseling programs that conduct interventions primarily in the classroom are successful because students may not feel the stigma that can come with being pulled out of class and the student receives support he or she needs in a natural setting without missing class (Clark and Breman, 2009). Younger students can have a difficult time generalizing learning from the environment and context in which the information was learned into other settings or subject areas. The added benefit of school counseling curriculum conducted in the classroom is that teachers appreciate additional support and benefit from learning new approaches with students who have academic or behavior problems.

Student Success Skills is an example of a classroom counseling program created based on three skills identified as improving academic and social development (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994 as cited in Miranda, Webb, Brigman, & Peluso, 2007). Miranda et al. (2007) described the first set of skills to include cognitive and metacognitive skills including goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills. Listening, interpersonal skills, working as a team, and problem solving are social skills known to be essential. Self-management abilities comprising of attention, motivation, and anger management conclude the list of skills to improve success academically and socially.

Miranda et al. (2007) used data collected from previous studies on the Student Success Skills program to determine if any differences in the success rate occurred between White, Latino and African American students. What they found was that there was not any statistical
difference in achievement between ethnic groups. Following the participation in Student Success Skills, achievement scores in reading and math improve at similar levels regardless of ethnicity. Miranda et al. further suggests, it is evident that the path to closing the achievement gap between Black and White students is on developing the three essential skill sets needed in academic learning, not the content to be learned.

School counselors can evaluate their comprehensive school counseling program by gathering data using pre-tests/post-tests, surveys, and using disaggregated data already gathered by the school or district to determine the academic needs of students who are falling behind. The previously identified studies are examples of how school counselors use academic development interventions to close the achievement gap between Black and White students.

*Connecting School-Family-Community Support Systems*

Alfred Adler suggests in his theory of Individual Psychology that all individuals are socially embedded. In other words, everything that an individual does has a varying effect on everyone that comes into contact with that individual. A school counselor works to create lasting bonds between the school, family and community support systems to improve academic achievement of all students. Students do not live life in a vacuum and are constantly affected by those around them. According to Bryan (2005), a school counselor has many roles to fill including advocate, team facilitator and collaborator. The school counselor must fill the role of collaborator effectively to further the trend of narrowing the achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students.

Fusick and Bordeau (2004) suggested that African American families would be naturally skeptical of school personnel if there were not any communication from the school to the home. To connect a student’s school and family, it is the school counselor’s responsibility to reverse the
alienation of families in the education process by speaking with parents regularly about their child’s successes. Children with parents who expect their child to attain education beyond high school tend to score higher on measures of reading achievement (Flowers and Flowers, 2008). Bryan (2005) urged that family involvement not only raises expectations, it is also more likely those students will get higher grades, enroll in more rigorous classes, go on to college, and have better academic achievement related behaviors such as social skills and regular attendance in school. Parents who hear about their child’s success at school will come to expect more of the same in the future.

Amatea et al. developed a 4-step process that could be used for engaging and communicating with students and their families who are transitioning from one education level to the next (as cited in Davis & Lambie, 2005, p. 147-149). The initial step in the process is to conduct a needs assessment of attitudes and practices school-home communication between school personnel and families of new students. Depending on the data gathered from the needs assessment, the second step in the process would be to educate school personnel on how to block the blaming process and engage in a no-fault co-decision making process that includes the voice of all stakeholders. The next step in the communication process is restructuring the interaction patterns of families and schools. School personnel will provide flexible time frames for families to schedule meetings and conferences. The school personnel will use the model of no-fault co-decision making communication and at times, the student will define the direction of the meeting giving him or her a voice in their education. Finally, the last step is evaluation and accommodation where school personnel request feedback from students, caregivers, and any other stakeholders involved on how to improve communication process between school personnel and families.
Collaboration is the process of reaching goals that cannot be reached alone but through a shared vision (Bryan, 2005). School Counselors can continue to close the achievement gap by grouping individuals together to attain a common goal by contributing equally with mutual expertise and responsibility. Schools make for an excellent place to collaborate with other personnel because of the availability of effective role models, support people, and health services that work with the whole student to remove cultural myths and provide the best educational practices and strategies (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004; Simcox, Nuijens & Lee, 2006).

Flowers and Flowers (2008) provided an example of facilitating a collaboration between teachers and librarians where teachers could gain a better understanding of the books in which current students have an interest. Teachers could then use the suggested books as texts for instruction rather than books in which students show little interest. This example shows how school counselors have a unique position in a school to encourage collaboration not only with themselves and other school personnel but also between other staff or faculty.

Besides collaborating with education personnel within the school, it is important for school counselors to broker resources in the community to further learning opportunities for all students in the school (Simcox, Nuijens, & Lee, 2006). The authors recommend school counselors organize community stakeholders to supplement academic initiatives for which the school is not able provide on its own. It is equally important for school administration to ensure that all students have access to quality reading materials at public libraries that are inviting to all students (Flowers & Flowers, 2008).

School counselors can develop partnership programs for Black students who are struggling academically or socially to enhance achievement (Bryan, 2005). Many community leaders or professionals, representatives from historically Black colleges, or spiritual leaders are
eager to give time and energy for tutoring or mentoring programs that will benefit any student who is struggling. Faith-based programs can be a great medium in which to disseminate information to African American families (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004; Bryan, 2005).

Equitable Representation Across Curriculum Tracks

Darity Jr. et al. (2001) indicated that research on the lack of equity and access to challenging curricula for Black students compared to White students has focused primarily on five hypotheses. Depending on the hypothesis, the data suggests students, teachers, schools or any combination may be responsible for the achievement gap that has plagued the U.S. for decades. Each theory is driven by data and provides insight into the possible explanations of why equity and access to challenging curriculum has not been available to African American students.

‘Acting white’ is the first hypothesis identified as contributing to widening the gap between Black and White students to gain access to advanced curriculum (Darity Jr. et al., 2001 and Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). However, the research on the hypothesis of “acting white” produced results indicating very little effect on Black students’ drive to academically succeed (Darity Jr. et al., 2001 and Cook & Ludwig, 1997). Black students who are capable of succeeding or are already enrolled in advanced or gifted academic programs are teased and pressured by their black peers to no longer continue challenging themselves academically. High achieving students and students in schools where there are more interactions between students of diverse ethnicities are affected the most by the theory of ‘acting white’ (Fryer, Jr. & Torelli, 2006). Many black students feel they experience expectations of success from society that were designed for only white people. As a result, many black students will not identify themselves with achievement for fear of being described as white person.
Darity Jr. et al. (2001) indicated the results of research on “acting white” have shown to be inconsistent (Darity Jr. et al., 2001 and Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Whether the hypothesis is accepted or not, successful School Counselors believe all students want to succeed academically regardless of the color of their skin. All students, especially those from minority backgrounds who strive to succeed, should be encouraged to continue challenging themselves.

The second hypothesis indicates the process for selecting students to enroll in challenging curricula has widened the equity gap between black students and their white peers (Darity Jr. et al., 2001). The procedures often used to identify students who might succeed in advanced or gifted academic programs are disproportionate when compared to the whole student body. This is especially true at the elementary and middle school levels where it is most crucial for all students to gain the knowledge and experience of taking challenging curricula. Fusick and Bordeau (2004) explained that students who are placed in lower level classes would not learn skills and concepts that students in upper level classes will learn. Since students in lower level classes are not being taught the information needed to advance to the upper level classes, they will remain in the lower level classes without the opportunity to catch up.

It has been hard to eliminate old methods of placement or identification of students into classes with various levels of difficulty. In the United States, there are stipulations for the selection of students to enroll in special education programs. There are not any standard guidelines for schools, districts or states for enrollment into gifted programs or advanced level classes (Ford, 1998). The enrollment requirements are determined by individual states or school districts. Teacher selection and academic performance factors always seem to carry more weight in the final decision leaving many black students out of advanced and challenging classes. Teachers, like other professionals, are biased in the decision making process and academic
achievement does not tell the story of a student’s capability. When left up to these two factors, Black students are unequally included in advanced classes.

Darity Jr. et al. (2001) suggested that within the education professional community there has been a small movement to change, or at the very least, expand the identification or placement process for students into various levels of classes. Furthermore, new or additional placement methods have been suggested to include rating scales, personal narratives, teacher recommendations, peer nominations, or recognized accomplishments both in and outside of school. The traditional placement methods have left Black students behind. Alternative methods will provide additional opportunities for students to showcase unrecognized abilities. If students were allowed to use their abilities in a way that can be applied to the curriculum, additional students would qualify for classes in which the level of difficulty matches their potential and capability.

Oakes and Wells (1998) researched the tracking methods across the United States and highlighted creative ways in which schools are detracking the process for students to enroll in classes where advanced curriculum is taught. In other words, students who are in lower or middle level classes have the opportunity and ability to escape that track and enroll in advanced track classes. Several schools had eliminated low-level classes and only offering one regular level class and one advanced class. In a study conducted by Burris et al. (2008), the authors found that detracking classes increased the odds of achieving the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma increased by 70% for all students. The authors also found that by detracking classes, schools using the New York Regents exam as a graduation standard increased their diploma attainment by three times for White and Asian students, five times for Black students on
free or reduced lunch, and twenty-six times for Black students were not on free and reduced lunch.

According to Oakes and Wells, another way to detrack enrollment in classes was to make advanced classes available to all students regardless of their achievement level. The most creative way of detracking was to only offer regular level classes with an honors optional project that could be completed if the student chose to go above and beyond what was required. School counselors must be involved in the placement process to encourage teachers, as an objective voice, to be creative and look at the whole student rather than just traditional factors that might predict academic success.

According to the five-hypotheses model developed by Darity Jr. and colleagues (2001), increased learning opportunities is the third way to improved equity and access to challenging curricula for Black students, therefore, closing the achievement gap. Cooper and Liou (2007) defined opportunities to learn as, “conditions or circumstances within schools and classrooms that promote learning for all students” (p. 44). Opportunities to learn would include curricula, learning materials, facilities, teachers, and instruction a student would experience while earning an education. The authors suggest that school counselors play a significant role in dissemination information to students increasing opportunities to learn. A weak relationship between a student and his or her school counselor will lessen opportunities to learn.

According to a report by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (2005), schools cannot increase the rates in which African American students received diplomas if both White and Black students are provided the same educational opportunities. Using race neutral strategies to increase learning opportunities by providing exactly the same opportunities for Black and White students would benefit some Blacks, but it would not address the issue of
inequality. Hallinan and Sorenson (1977) suggested, that learning factors such as opportunities, in addition to effort and ability to learn interact with each other. According to the authors, hard work and ability are important for students to learn at a high level, but without opportunities to learn, students cannot reach their potential intelligence.

Hallinan and Sorenson (1977) encouraged education authorities to consider lack of learning opportunities as a possible reason why Black students are not as successful on standardized tests as their non-Black counterparts. Many Black students do not have the opportunity and access to the same level of classes as their white peers and therefore, haven’t been exposed to challenging curriculum that would prepare them to be successful on tests such as the ACT or SAT. Race must be a factor in the comprehensive strategy in reducing the achievement gap.

The fourth explanation of lack of equity and access to challenging curricula, as stated by Darity Jr. et al. (2001), is the teacher expectations of black students to succeed in advanced level courses. Educators who subscribe to this philosophy believe that the responsibility for student learning and achievement is completely attributed to teacher behavior and practices. Since there is such a large achievement gap between white and black students, teachers tend to expect less, press less, and steer black students away from more difficult courses.

Socioeconomic status is the fifth possibility discussed by Darity Jr. et al. (2001) to show the disparity between Black and White students regarding equity and access to challenging curricula. Bemak and Chung (2005) suggested that there is an achievement gap that exists for poor students and students of color. In a study of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and college admissions conducted by Carnevale and Rose (2003), the authors stated that if higher education institutions reduced their recruitment of potential students with low socioeconomic
status, the proportion of minority students would decrease (as cited in NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., 2005, p. 12). It is known that youth who have a low socioeconomic status or live in poverty have less access to services that would help them learn to handle difficulties surrounding emotions, behaviors, academics, and health. According to Burris et al. (2008), not only do students need to be supplied with adequate resources, but also adequate distribution of those resources is equally important. Unfortunately, there is very little research on minorities who are of a higher socioeconomic status; therefore, it is hard to know the real effect of socioeconomic status on equity and access to services that would improve their chances of academic success. Also, the lack of research on minorities with high socioeconomic status allows educators to create stereotypes justifying their low expectations for all minority students.

Small Class Sizes

Many times school counselors are responsible for creating student schedules. This is especially true at the high school level. Therefore, school counselors are directly involved in the size of classes. School Counselors should do their best to make sure classroom numbers are dispersed as evenly and with the lowest numbers of students as possible. A reduction in the numbers of students in classrooms may have a large effect on closing the achievement gap between Black and White students.

Krueger & Whitmore (2001) suggested that students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefited the most from class sizes that are small in numbers. The authors examined the academic achievement of kindergartners assigned to classroom sizes of 13-17 as opposed to classrooms with 22-25 students. The results of the authors’ study showed that White students in small size classrooms scored 3-4 percentile points or 0.13 standard deviations higher than those students in regular size classrooms, while Black students scored 7-10 percentile points or 0.26
standard deviations higher. In other words, Black students closed the achievement gap by 38% based on the reduction of kindergarten classroom size.

For all students to make substantial gains in academic achievement the reduction in classroom size needed to be a period of more than two years (Thompson, O’Quinn, & North Carolina Education Research Council, 2001; Finn, Gerber & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005). Thompson et al. (2001) also found that reduction in class sizes helps students from all backgrounds but it produces the greatest benefit for students of racial minorities and low income. These students are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to take college entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT. Krueger and Whitmore (2001) found similar results, assigning all students regardless of their background closed the gap in test taking rates for Black students compared to White students by 60%. In classroom sizes of 22-25, the gap between Black and White students taking entrance exams was 12.9% and in small classes of 13-17 students, the gap was reduced to 5.1%.

Krueger and Whitmore (2001) went as far as to suggest that education governing bodies should target communities with relatively high minorities and implement classroom size restrictions. However, they suggested that if this is not politically possible that the rules should be implemented for all schools. Regardless, there still would be a significant reduction in the achievement gap between Black and White students.

*Ethnic Identity Development*

Rayle and Myers (2004) conducted the first study where ethnic identity and acculturation were studied together as it relates to students feeling as though he or she matters (p. 81). One interesting finding the authors discovered in their study, minority participants perceive they matter less than non-minority adolescent do, and their level of ethnic identity is what significantly predicts their wellness. This was not the case for non-minority adolescents. In fact,
they found that non-minority participants in the study didn’t feel they even had an ethnic identity. Holcomb-McCoy (2005) suggested that group work with students, particularly White students, who show little or no interest in their ethnic background is important in creating a culture where ethnic identity is valued. Carter (1997), Davidson (1996), McIntyre (1997) examined how “Whiteness”, as an identity and culture system, is embodied and institutionalized in many settings including schools (as cited in Holcomb-McCoy, 2005).

Rayle and Myers (2004) used several sources to develop the authors’ definition of ethnic identity. It can be defined as, “finding a sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors which go along with that particular ethnic group (Rayle and Myers, 2004, p. 81).” In simpler terms, ethnic identity development might be described as how African American students determine what it means to be a Black person in a culture dominated by White people (Bruce et al., 2009). Ethnic identity development allows the school counselor to comprehend how a student transitions from an individual that is impacted very little by ethnic group membership to an individual who feels their ethnic and racial group membership is what defines them as a person (Day-Vines, Patton, and Baytops, 2003).

Day-Vines et al. (2003) described how African American youth live within a “triple quandary” of identities where an individual might struggle to effectively identify himself or herself simultaneously as mainstream American, a minority American, and an African American. Shin et al. (2007) found that students who had a higher sense of ethnic identity were more engaged in school and not affected as much by negative peer norms. Black students encounter difficulties maintaining their identities socially in both mainstream America and African American cultures because they tend to be culturally opposing forces. As a result, students who are not able to adequately handle the tension and inner turmoil from trying to gain acceptance by
both groups may develop psychological distress. A school counselor who is encouraging by promoting self-understanding and self-acceptance will be better equipped to handle situations involving Black students struggling to find his or her ethnic identity.

As described by Fusick & Bordeau (2005), in order for school counselors to be effective in helping students develop their ethnic identity, they must first be aware of their own biases towards individuals of different races. Multicultural competent school counselors can support students in developing their ethnic identity by helping him or her gain a better understanding of his or her ethnicity, how it affects academic goals and how it shapes relationships with others. Many students need assistance in exploring the differences between what it is like to be Black in an urban setting in the Midwest compared to being Black in a rural South setting and how the experience of growing up in one environment may affect people in different ways. Rayle and Myers (2004) suggested that developing an ethnic identity helps both ethnic minority and non-minority students understand himself or herself and his or her peers in an academic environment.

**Interpersonal Development**

Interpersonal development is everything that occurs between two people. African American students who feel discriminated against in school or isolated in their community tend to have lower academic achievement. Interpersonal development approaches facilitate optimism, resiliency, and self-control in adverse situations, all qualities that would be needed to overcome the unfair circumstances contributing to the achievement gap (Fusick & Bordeau, 2004).

Campbell and Brigman (2005) used a group approach to interpersonal development and found a positive correlation between interpersonal development and both academic achievement and school appropriate behavior. Bemak, Chi-Ying and Siroskey (2005) also found using a group approach with an empowerment theme improved achievement. The authors also found positive
long-term effects of the empowerment group where participants reported more effectively resolving interpersonal problems, paying more attention to schoolwork, and better attendance rates.

Two interpersonal development approaches that might be effective when working with African American students are Bireda’s Stroke-Sting-Stroke (SSS) method (as cited in Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005, p. 241) and building school-family-community partnerships (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Day-Vines & Day-Hairston (2005) described the SSS method of providing feedback to students consists of three phases. The first phase is to verbally stroke the student, in which the school counselor will make a statement about him or her that he or she might think is positive. The positive statement is issued to establish the fact that the student is appreciated. Next, the counselor would verbally sting the student by issuing critical feedback. Finally, the school counselor would issue another stroking statement to the student that he or she might see as complimentary. The second stroke is delivered to reiterate to the student that the school counselor respects and appreciates him or her even though it was necessary to reprimand or criticize his or her behavior. According to the authors, school counselors must have well thought out criticism for African American males and incorporate outside influences into school life in order to enhance relationships.

An example of a school counselor using the SSS method of issuing criticism to a Black male student who is not achieving at the same level in algebra as he was earlier in the semester might enfold with the school counselor saying, “Jason, will you step into my office for a second?” Once the door is closed and there are no other students able to overhear the conversation, the counselor would proceed by saying; “Your leadership in our school is noticed by everyone who knows you and so many students look to you for direction in their lives. In
passing, your algebra teacher mentioned to me that your grade has dropped from an A earlier in the semester to a B-. I have complete confidence that you will work hard and bring your grade back up to achieve your full potential.”

School-family-community partnerships are another important approach to interpersonal development between a school counselor and African American students (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). School counselors can build partnerships with a student’s family and community leaders or organizations creating an atmosphere where interactions with all are coordinated and integrated into the student’s entire school experience. Everyone in that student’s life would be involved in identifying problems, creating strategies to alleviate problems, and implementing the same programs across all environments. Education partnerships could be built with parents, administrators, other students, mental health workers, juvenile justice officials, or religious leaders depending on who the student feels is important in his or her life.

*Professional Development for School Counselors*

Continual professional development for school counselors and other school personnel on topics of multicultural competency is essential to closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. Fusick and Bordeau (2004) suggested that educators continue to develop professionally to find what works best for Black students in the classroom. Holcomb-McCoy (2004) developed a multicultural competency checklist that can be used by school counselors consisting of nine categories or competencies that the author thinks are essential for practicing school counseling. The author suggests that a school counselor could use the checklist either as a process for developing multicultural competency, or as a guide for leading professional development activities with other school personnel. School Counselors must include closing the achievement gap as a regular topic in their professional development opportunities.
Arrendondo et al. (1996) wrote an article describing a multicultural competency concept based on the Dimensions of Personal Identity model that school counselors could adopt. The authors explain Dimension A as a set of characteristics that individuals are not able to control such as age, gender, ethnicity, or first language. Dimension C is described as how an individual is seen within their historical, political, socio-cultural, or economic contexts. Dimension B is the consequences as a result of Dimensions A and C. These are shared experiences that can not be seen based on individual characteristics, but are affected by the context in which the experiences occur. Examples of Dimension B might be divorced or married; homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or trans-sexual; and most relevant to this paper is individual experience in educational settings.

In addition to using Holcomb-McCoy’s (2004) multicultural competency checklist, Arrendondo et al. (1996) offered several other strategies for becoming more culturally competent. The authors suggested that a school counselor should build a foundation of knowledge to apply culturally appropriate interventions based informal research on the diverse student population in the school and interviews with leaders in the school or community that currently provide effective services. Discussing with others and reading about their identity development processes gives a school counselor first-hand knowledge of what it is like to, for example, be an African American in an urban high school in the South. Lastly, a strategy to be more culturally competent might be to expand the understanding of different worldviews. It is important to spend time in communities that are different from yours but also that are relevant to your student population. Ultimately, it is the school counselor’s responsibility to learn about other cultures without the expectation that those in the culture will teach you.
Collection and Disaggregation of Useful Data

School Counselors can use the ASCA National Model as a guide to gather data that is appropriate and useful in closing the achievement gap between Black students and their White counterparts. The ASCA National model states that school counseling programs should be developed through student needs, achievement and useful data collected (American School Counselor Association, 2005). According to Isaacs (2003), the achievement gap can be seen in data analyzed on differential graduation rates from high schools and college and poor academic performance in reading and math.

Isaacs (2003) pointed out a critical question in closing the achievement gap, “Are school counselors effectively identifying the barriers that need to be overcome for all or some students?” School counselors can only answer that question by gathering useful data that identifies the barriers Black students meet regularly that prevent them from achieving at the same rate as White students. Once interventions are created based on the data gathered, the school counselor must gather more data to see if the interventions are effective and what difference was made due to implementing the intervention.

In Isaacs (2003) article, the author identified several easy methods for gathering and using data that might be helpful for school counselors. Qualitative and quantitative data are two different types of data. Qualitative data is gathered to make a judgment of quality on the interventions school counselors used to improve student achievement. Qualitative data can be obtained through satisfaction surveys, questionnaires, follow up studies, interviews, case studies or portfolios. Many times, Qualitative data is used to highlight an aberration in the data that requires more extensive and in depth observation.
Quantitative data is expressed as numbers used to determine the frequency of an action, percentages, improvement on pre-tests compared to post-tests, or the amount of money it will cost to spend a determined amount of time on a specified activity. Quantitative data can be manipulated statistically to show correlations and trends that might be happening within the school to help you make better decisions on how to break down barriers for students who aren’t succeeding at the same rates as their peers.

Once data are gathered, the school counselor must disaggregate the data by separating it into groups based on different variables. Variables school counselors may be interested in are gender, race, age, or length of time in school. Variables can then be compared within groups, between groups, or they can be analyzed over time. The most efficient way for school counselors to obtain data to determine where school counselors are most needed would be to use data that the school, district, or state already collects. In Ware and Galassi’s (2006) article, the authors described how to take disaggregated data and find correlations and make predictions to enhance student achievement.

Data already collected by the school, district, or state may be helpful in targeting struggling students or finding achievement gaps, but many times that might not be enough. School counselors would then need to gather new data. New data might consist of needs assessments, questionnaires, focus groups, satisfaction surveys, assessments of change, or following students’ long term comparing similar groups each year (Isaacs, 2003). Rumberger’s (2007) study is a good example of following students’ long term achievement where the author found that there was a growing achievement gap between Black and White students from the beginning of kindergarten (0.60 standard deviations) to the end of fifth grade (0.88 standard deviations). By the end of fifth grade the achievement gap had grown nearly 50 percent.
Group Counseling

Public policy of No Child Left Behind has created an educational environment with an emphasis on standardized testing and rewards and punishments where schools are struggling to meet the necessary levels of achievement to close gaps and be considered a successful school. Group work can be a valuable tool in closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) suggested that group counseling allows Black adolescents explore their personal feelings, learn new coping strategies, and process individual experiences as well as comparing those to the group’s experiences. Effective group counseling could provide Black students opportunities to bond with other classmates and feel safe within the group while working towards a common goal of academic achievement (Bruce et al., 2009). Targeted group counseling programs position school counselors as agents for change in schools with practices that continue to widen the achievement gap.

Bruce et al. (2009), as highlighted earlier in the academic development section, provided an example of how a specifically designed group counseling curriculum can affect the academic achievement of African American students on graduation tests. The group counseling curriculum was not only successful in improving graduation test scores, but the students also reported that they were most pleased with their school counselor. Campbell and Brigman’s (2005) study found similar results. The students participating in the group earned reading and math test scores that were significantly higher than the comparison group of students that did not receive the school counseling intervention. As an added benefit, teachers reported that student behavior improved for the participants by 69% from the time the pre-survey was given to when the teachers completed the post-survey.
Schellenberg (2009) found that group counseling curriculum was a culturally responsive practice for school counselors to assist Black students who were academically achieving at a lower level than their classmates. The author’s study showed a significant increase in academic achievement by countering culturally negative messages with culture affirming self-talk. In an environment where many Black students are not pleased with teacher expectations or administrator and teacher fairness, group counseling sessions may be the only time in the student’s schedule where he or she fits in with fellow classmates. Group counseling can be an effective use of time and resources for school counselors to reach as many students as possible while closing the achievement gap.

Career Development

There are several barriers many African American youth experience while developing a career path including discriminatory hiring practices, inadequate school training, and inadequate social skill training (Fusick and Bordeau, 2004). Much of the research in career development according to the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research has indicated that career education in general does not have a great effect on student career development (McGannon, Carey & Dimmit, 2005). Even so, comprehensive school counseling curriculum including career development with a culturally competent design might aid Black students to overcome barriers that keep them from achieving their career goals.

According to the ASCA National Model (2002), school counselors should implement career development curriculum that helped students acquire skills necessary for the world of work, make informed decisions about careers, and use strategies to achieve career satisfaction. Also, career development curriculum should include goal setting, academic counseling groups,
and providing career centers where students can receive support through the process of choosing a path towards a career.

Evans and Burck (1992) used a meta-analysis to see the effect of career education interventions on student achievement. The authors found that there was a gain in academic achievement for students who participated in a career development program when compared to students who were not provided career education. Not surprisingly, students achieved an even greater increase in achievement when they participated in the same program a second year.

School counselors could use career development curriculum already created for their comprehensive school counseling program. Examples might be Lee and Simmons’ Life Planning Model, School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (as cited in Fusick & Bordeau, 2005, p. 110), or the PRO-100 Program (Loughead, Shu-Hui, & Middleton, 1995). The Life-Planning model uses both social and academic aspects to teach students skills that might be valuable later in life. Specific activities are designed to encourage students to think about occupational choices and to make decisions based on possible life changes students might go through as they follow their career path.

School-to-Work Opportunities Act (1994) is a funding source used by schools to create various career development programs that established a supportive network in the community. The programs used parents and community members as role models. Partnerships are built with local businesses to provide additional funding, opportunities for internships for students, and on the job training for students who need additional experience learning appropriate behavior in the workplace.

Loughead et al. (1995) described The PRO-100 Career Development Program as a career education program created for impoverished youth living in the inner city. Participants learned
curriculum focusing on obtaining basic life skills that are frequently considered necessary for contributing to society. Similar to the Life-Planning model, the students learned on-the-job behavior and skills needed to develop their career. Additionally, students learned job-search skills in preparation to independently look for employment after high school or college. Using a pre-test/post-test tool, the study found that career planning and job searching skills significantly increased for students participating in The PRO-100 Career Development Program. The students also reported satisfaction in the career development process and work related experiences.

A comprehensive school counseling program including a career development component is important for students living in impoverished communities. Career counseling programs give opportunities to students coming from less fortunate settings to learn what is required of someone who might be considered successful in his or her career of interest.

Conclusion

Education in the United States for African Americans and other minority groups has made enormous strides as a result of the end of World War II when the achievement gap was initially addressed as a social and educational problem. By the middle of the 1980s the achievement gap between Black and White students had nearly closed (Harris & Herington, 2006). In the 1990s the achievement gap again started growing, consequently, No Child Left Behind legislation was implemented changing the focus of education by rewarding or punishing schools based on closing achievement gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Comprehensive school counseling programs and interventions help schools close achievement gaps in career, academic, and peer/social domains. School counselors fill a pivotal role in student lives by assisting families, implementing interventions that support students who have fallen behind, advocating for those students who have been marginalized by discriminatory
practices. Academic interventions carried out by counselors are in line with the school’s overall mission by encouraging equity across curriculum tracks, reducing class sizes, and collaborating with other educators to improve achievement for all students. Furthermore, school counselors help close achievement gaps by encouraging students to explore various career interests, enhance interpersonal skills, and assist with developing individual student ethnic identity.

In the wake of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is promising that the achievement gap between Black and White students will reverse the trend of the 1990s and will again start to narrow. Although, many students do not come to school with equal academic, personal/social, and career resources considered essential for educational achievement, school counselors are uniquely positioned in schools to implement comprehensive school counseling interventions that close achievement gaps providing opportunities for all students to succeed. Aligning with the federal legislations, the American School Counselor Association (2001) pledged that schools would be judged by the success of all students, not by the school’s highest achieving students.
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